

Hiring the Sales Superstar

by Ron Black

Looking for sales talent? In this dynamic market, you're not alone! Choosing effective sales people is a difficult and potentially dangerous activity. Hiring the wrong person can put your growth, reputation, and even your cash flow at risk.

So how do you find the perfect person for your company? In growth markets, this may be impossible. The sales superstars are already employed, and every worthy sales manager will keep them happy, no matter what it takes. You're likely faced with choosing from a less experienced applicant pool and from those with little or no track records. But don't despair! If you know what to look for, you can uncover your own sales superstar.

Almost two decades of building, managing, and revitalizing sales organizations for technology firms has taught me one very clear lesson—it is easier to teach technology to a sales person than it is to teach sales to a technologist. So if the best sales people are unavailable, and your strengths are technology- rather than sales-centric, here are some pointers to help you find the talent you need.

Rule 1: Don't hire the best talker.

Hire the best listener. Customers want to be heard and understood, and the successful sales team is adept at finding needs and communicating them to your technical staff. But it's not enough that a salesperson uncovers and understands the issues. Superstars reflect their understanding back to the prospect. In doing so, they build rapport, foster trust, and advance the prospect's confidence in your solutions.

Here's an interview tip: Assess the applicant's ability to find and understand *your* company's sales needs. Ask yourself, did the applicant uncover our key issues? Did they prove to me that they understood by restating these issues in their own words? If you observe these important behaviors in the interview, the candidate will likely use them in their future selling efforts, as well.

Rule 2: Don't choose the person that looks like the best sales person.

Rather, choose the applicant who makes you feel the most confident. While looking the part is important, honesty, integrity, and a gracious caring about others, are the essentials of building fruitful business relationships. Remember that your customers will only commit to a sale when they are confident in their decision. From your potential customer's viewpoint, ask yourself, "Does this person really understand and accept my point-of-view? Can I trust them my checkbook? Can I trust them with my reputation?" If your instincts are saying only "maybe", your prospects will be saying only "no". When there is doubt, there is no sale.

Rule 3: Hire for the fire.

Skill, knowledge, and experience have zero value without the innate desire to achieve. And nothing boosts sales performance more than increasing activity levels. This requires energetic, competitive, survivors. Selling is frequently difficult and monotonous work, interspersed with periods of stress, frustration, apprehension, and only occasionally a dose of counter-balancing exuberance. So...

Look for toughness and achievement. Find the applicant who hasn't had it easy and yet achieves—the single mom who makes it all happen and still has a smile on her face; the meat cutter who at 30

put himself through college; the last ten runners to finish the marathon. These are the tough achievers who become superstars.

Rule 4: Not all sales people are good at all sales functions.

Find those who get up on Monday morning and say, "Thank goodness the weekend is finally over, I get to go _____!" Be sure their preferred activity describes your company's most pressing need. Sales people have a strong tendency to do what they like, not necessarily what will produce the best results.

Here's another interviewing tip. Ask every candidate: "What do you most and least like about the selling process?" If the answer is a glossed over "I like it all", beware. The best producers realize that selling is a process and each step must be successfully worked. Specific answers indicate a better understanding of the multiple facets of sales, and more importantly, it indicates the integrity and courage to be honest under pressure. Find a sales person who acknowledges both their strengths and weaknesses, and you've found a diamond in the rough!

These are the key elements by which your prospects judge your sales people, your company and your solutions. Your sales people reflect your organization's ability, integrity, and customer commitment. You can ill afford less than a superstar.

Remember that these pointers are intended to supplement your hiring process, not replace it. And don't forget to look for candidates: who are better listeners than talkers; who graciously make you feel confident; to whom you can entrust your reputation; who have overcome adversity; and finally, who know, admit, and work around their own shortcomings. When you find one, hire quickly. You've just found your next sales superstar!

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